



# Doomed regionalism in a redrawn Maghreb? The changing shape of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco in the post-2011 era

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## ABSTRACT


Since independence, intra-Maghrebi relations have been marked by a pattern of bilateral rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, which has conditioned the construction of the Maghreb and hampered regional integration initiatives. This article discusses the impact of political transformations on this longstanding pattern of behaviour since 2011. While shared perceptions of threat initially prompted a short-lived 'defensive détente' between the two countries, this rapprochement soon yielded to a new period of rivalry. Moreover, the sub-regional context in the area is tumultuous, due to the deterioration of the security situation in Mali and Libya. Once again, the zero-sum perspective that characterises Moroccan-Algerian relations has prevailed, preventing both countries from cooperating in tackling regional crises. Additionally, new arenas of rivalry have emerged in the Sahel, what some have called the 'new security border for Europe' and a space in which both countries are competing for the roles of stabilising force and regional mediator.

Morocco has taken advantage of the growing interdependence around security issues between the Sahel and Maghreb after the collapse of the Libyan state and the instability in Mali to reposition itself as a regional actor in the Sahel space, challenging Algeria's traditional role in the region. The article examines the competition between the two countries to be seen by the international community as good partners, exporters of security and stability in the region. The rivalry has been reshaped in two principle areas: the competition for the role of mediator in the conflicts in Mali and Libya, and the competition to show expertise in the fight against terrorism and the processes of religious radicalisation. Finally, the rivalry between the two countries has extended into the rest of the African continent since Morocco's decision to abandon its empty-chair policy and join the African Union.

**KEYWORDS** Algeria; Morocco; intra-Maghrebi relations; Arab Spring; Sahel

## Introduction

The anti-authoritarian revolts of 2011 brought about the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. However, their impact in Algeria and Morocco was limited; although the

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protests led to the implementation of some reforms, they did not affect the power structure (Volpi 2013; Feliu and Izquierdo 2016). This article analyses the extent to which and how the political changes arising from the 2011 revolts on a sub-regional level affected the traditional pattern of rivalry between Algeria and Morocco that has structured bilateral relations since the countries gained independence. The article argues that this pattern of rivalry has adapted to a region in transformation in which geopolitical divisions are becoming less rigid. The growing interdependence with regard to security between the Maghreb and Sahel (Martinez and Boserup 2017) has extended the rivalry between the two countries to the region near the Sahel and the rest of the African continent. The vacuum left in this region by Libya after the overthrow of Qaddafi and Algeria's resistance to involving itself beyond its borders have presented Morocco with an opportunity to push for proactive diplomacy towards the region. By challenging Algeria's leadership in its own backyard, Rabat has sought not only to secure enhanced support for its position regarding Western Sahara, but also to gain some status as a regional power in Africa in the face of the failure of the Maghrebi integration project and, finally, to reinforce its role as a stabilising force in the region in the eyes of the European Union (EU).

The article analyses the rivalry between the countries to take on the role of regional mediator and lead the search for negotiated solutions in Mali and Libya, thereby solidifying their image as 'good partners' to the international community. The article also analyses the competition to establish expertise in the fight against terrorism and the processes of religious radicalisation. In response to the Algerian model based on the experience acquired during the 1990s in the country's fight against Islamist groups, Rabat has proposed a preventative model based on the dissemination of 'Islam of the golden mean'. The third area of the Morocco-Algeria rivalry is related to Morocco's decision to return to the African Union and to recover the space it ceded to Algeria after Morocco withdrew from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1984.

Methodologically, this empirical study is based on a qualitative analysis of press releases, speeches and official documents from the Algerian and Moroccan Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the official website of the Moroccan government ([www.maroc.ma](http://www.maroc.ma)). In addition, nearly 200 online newspaper pieces were analysed including articles from *Algeria-Watch*, *al-Watan*, *Le Matin d'Algérie*, *El Moudjahid Jeune Afrique*, *Le Matin du Sahara*, *Yabiladi* and *Tel Quel*.

## The Algeria-Morocco pattern of rivalry

Since the countries gained independence, intra-Maghrebi relations have been marked by a pattern of rivalry between Morocco and Algeria. The view of

Algerian-Moroccan relations as a zero sum game connected to the battle for regional hegemony has not prevented moments of direct confrontation, including the Sand War of 1963 and skirmishes in Amghala in 1976, the suspension of diplomatic relations from 1976 to 1988 and the closure of the land border since 1994, all combined with periods of *détente* (Amirah-Fernández 2004).

A review of the evolution of intra-Maghrebi relations shows how Algeria and Morocco are more prone to seek *détente* when the leading elites in the two countries share a perception of vulnerability in the region. This occurred, for example, in the late 1980s, when a shared domestic legitimacy crisis led to a thaw in bilateral relations that were jeopardised by border differences and the conflict in Western Sahara (Zoubir 2012b). The reconciliation between the two countries made it possible to relaunch the regional integration project. The creation of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) in February 1989 was justified by the need to present a common front in the face of globalisation challenges resulting from the recomposition of the international system at the end of the Cold War (Hernando de Larramendi 2008).

On the contrary, when the perception of vulnerability has been asymmetrical, the rivalry has tended to intensify. This occurred when it became clear that the legislative elections in Algeria were going to be won by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), unleashing a bloody civil war in that country in 1992. The fear among Algerians that Morocco would use this moment of weakness to legitimise its control over Western Sahara internationally (Hernando de Larramendi 2008) and would support Algerian Islamists in order to destabilise the regime reactivated the pattern of bilateral rivalry (Belkaïd 2015). Finally, the land border was closed in August 1994 after the terrorist attack at the Hotel Atlas Asni in Marrakech, carried out by French citizens of Algerian origin (Hernando de Larramendi 2012, 93).

### **The impact of the 2011 anti-authoritarian revolts on Algerian-Moroccan relations**

The wave of pro-democratic mobilisations that crossed North Africa during 2011 once again reinforced the perception of shared vulnerability, producing a short-lived reactivation of bilateral relations. Mohamed VI's calls to overcome 'sterile antagonisms' and build a new regional order were accompanied by improved relations with Algeria (Mohammed VI 2011). As part of this 'defensive *détente*' (Fernández-Molina 2016, 93), Moroccan Foreign Minister Saadeddine Othmani chose Algiers for his first official visit in January 2012, nine years after the last visit by a Moroccan minister of Foreign Affairs. The agreement to create a mechanism for regular political consultations between heads of ministries from both countries was accompanied by a proliferation of conciliatory declarations that avoided the most conflictive topics

on the bilateral agenda like the Western Sahara question. Examples of this climate of détente included Rabat's decision to support Algeria's candidacy to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and flexibilisation in the Algerian position on reopening the land border, a constant demand from Rabat since 2008 (Hernando de Larramendi 2012).

This rapprochement coincided with the appeals made by Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki in February 2012 to advance the construction of a 'Maghreb of freedoms'. The counter to this voluntarist proposal that wanted to put democracy front and centre in the regional construction process was a realistic view that argued for the need to accelerate regional integration by reinforcing security cooperation in view of the deteriorating situation in Libya after the death of Qaddafi and the impact of this instability on Mali. This was reflected in the agreements adopted during the UMA meeting of foreign affairs ministers held in Rabat in February 2012 on the 23rd anniversary of the creation of the organisation (Arab Maghreb Union 2012).

Reinforcing regional cooperation, however, was limited by the reactivation of the Algeria-Morocco pattern of rivalry. When the perception of threat to the Moroccan monarchy decreased, there was a concomitant decrease in incentives for bilateral dialogue with Algeria, without which no regional integration project could proceed. The victory of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) in the November 2011 legislative elections and the appointment of PJD Secretary-General Abdelilah Benkirane as prime minister hastened the decline of the 20 February movement (Desrues and Fernández-Molina 2013). When the Islamist association Justice and Spirituality withdrew from the 20 February Movement (which had channelled the demands to transform the Moroccan regime), it lost a large part of its ability to mobilise and apply pressure, which, in turn, allowed the monarchy to limit the concessions it had been forced to make in the earlier context of vulnerability (Macías Amoretti 2014). Although the 2011 Constitution opened a window of opportunity to rebalance power by increasing the powers of the executive branch and limiting those of the king, the coalition government presided over by the PJD accepted a 'subordinate cohabitation' that did not challenge the institutional framework of monarchical power (Halmi Berrabah 2017).

At the same time, the Algerian regime's perception of vulnerability also decreased. When the political and security situation began to worsen in Egypt, Libya and Syria, the Algerian authorities exploited the memory of the collective trauma caused by the violence of the 1990s to strengthen their argument that gradual reforms were preferable to brusque regime changes, which only produce chaos and instability. Some of the political reforms promised at the beginning of the revolt period were then postponed, such as the constitutional reform announced in April 2011 that was not enacted until 2016 (Mañé, Thieux, and Hernando de Larramendi 2016).

As the perception of the 'pro-democratic threat' by the Moroccan and Algerian regimes became less dire, the bilateral rivalry increased and, yet again, the deteriorating relations were related to Western Sahara. This case has been at the middle of the rivalry between the two countries since the Spanish withdrew from the territory in 1976. For Rabat, the Western Sahara situation is a bilateral dispute since it is only with the logistical, military and financial support of Algeria that the Sahrawi national liberation movement Polisario Front has been able to survive. For Algiers, on the other hand, the question is one of decolonisation and cannot be resolved until the Sahrawi people are able to exercise their right to self-determination. An early sign of the return to the Moroccan-Algerian pattern of rivalry appeared in April 2012, when representatives from the Moroccan government left the funeral of the first president of Algeria, Ahmed Ben Bella, to protest the presence of a delegation from the Polisario Front. Behind this gesture lay Morocco's suspicions about the proposal to extend the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to human rights monitoring. Rabat considered this a direct threat to its sovereignty over Western Sahara at a time when the centre of gravity of the Sahrawi protests had moved inside Western Sahara from the Tindouf refugee camps. Because of this fear, in April 2012, Rabat withdrew its confidence in Christopher Ross, the UN special envoy to Western Sahara, declaring him persona non grata in the autumn of that year. It also led to the suspension of military manoeuvres with the United States when Washington presented a draft proposal on the matter to the Security Council in April 2013. Finally, Morocco recalled its ambassador from Algiers for consultations in November 2013 after President Bouteflika called on the African Union to establish a human rights monitoring mechanism in Western Sahara (Fernández-Molina 2016).

The cooling of relations between the two countries can be measured in their attitudes about reopening the border. Not only is the border firmly closed, but a wall is now being built on both sides, justified by the need to bolster security and impede smuggling and infiltration by terrorist groups. In July 2014, Morocco announced the construction of a 150-km wall, and in October, the Algerian authorities approved a plan to dig ditches along the 6300-km border with its neighbouring countries, including Morocco (Berriah 2016).

### **Algerian and Moroccan perceptions of instability in the Sahel**

Since 2013, the deterioration in Algerian-Moroccan relations has been accompanied by the appearance of new arenas of rivalry. In addition to the Western Sahara question, which continues to be a central element in the Algeria-Morocco rivalry, new spaces of rivalry have opened up in response to the increasing instability in Libya and Mali (Ojeda-García, Fernández-

Molina, and Veguilla 2017). Although the security interdependence between the Sahel and Maghreb poses increasingly transnational threats, the asymmetrical perception of this situation by Algeria and Morocco has complicated bilateral cooperation and coordination, making it difficult for the two countries to collaborate in crisis management, which has turned into another arena of competition for each country to reinforce its status as regional power.

Algeria viewed the breakdown of the Malian state and the control of its immense northern territory – first by the Tuareg rebels from the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) and then by the Ansar Dine Islamists, supported by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – as a consequence of international intervention in Libya in 2011, which damaged Algeria's interests as a regional power (Zoubir 2012a, 455). The uncontrolled proliferation and circulation of arms from Libya through North Africa and the Sahel region, along with the return home of hundreds of Tuareg paramilitaries who had served in Qaddafi's Islamic Pan-African Legion, were seen by Algeria as decisive elements in the destabilisation of the region that allowed the military return of the former coloniser, first in Operation Serval (January 2013) and then in Operation Barkhane (June 2014).

Algeria considers international intervention in Libya a 'strategic error' that spoiled its security focus towards the Sahel, allowing local actors to implement their own agendas that, in many cases, did not coincide with Algeria's interests. The weakening of the client patronage networks woven in the region by Algerian security services during the two previous decades deprived Algeria of its main instrument of influence (Martinez and Boserup 2017, 154–156). The permanent destabilisation of the Sahel was seen by Algeria as a direct threat to its domestic security because of the risk of the terrorist threat spilling over into the country (Mañé, Thieux, and Hernando de Larramendi 2016, 71–72). This is not just a perception; seven Algerian diplomats were kidnapped in Gao by the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJAO) (Matarese 2012); there were suicide attacks against military and police installations in Tamanrasset and Ouargla that same year; and, above all, in January 2013 AQIM carried out a violent terrorist attack against the gas facility in Tigantourine, whose production at the time of the attack represented 18% of Algeria's natural gas exports (Boukhars 2016, 122). Launched in retaliation for Algerian collaboration with Operation Serval, this attack against the economic heart of the country, which holds the hydrocarbon reserves, revealed the vulnerability of a region where social conflict has escalated in recent years (International Crisis Group 2016). As an attack planned in Libya and executed through Mali, it exposed the risks of having long, porous borders, and convinced the Algerian authorities of the need to reinforce military control along them (Driss-Aït Hama-douche 2016).

Although the Sahel is viewed by the Algerian authorities as a security belt (Boutache 2016), Algeria's ability to ensure its influence in the region is limited by its longstanding principle of military non-intervention beyond its borders and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, as stipulated in the constitution approved in February 2016. The country's indecision and refusal to support UN-backed international intervention in Mali also reflected the conflicting views and interests within the opaque power structure of the Algerian regime (Ammour 2013, 1). Although the regime authorised *in extremis* the opening of its airspace to French fighter jets in January 2013 for Operation Serval, its unwillingness to intervene beyond its borders limited its options to play a regional leadership role. The country's attempts to ensure its influence through a 'neighbourhood policy', which would allow horizontal integration with the Sahel countries with Algeria as a kingpin and protector (International Crisis Group 2015, 9), conflicted with the country's national security doctrine. Shaped by Algeria's revolutionary past, this doctrine prevents the country from responding to requests for help in the fight against terrorism beyond its borders. Two examples are the appeals made by the authorities in the neighbouring countries of Mali in 2012 and Niger in 2013 to help control the terrorist attacks in Agadez and Arlit, respectively (Abba 2016). Algeria's resistance to assuming the role of regional policeman to fight illegal immigration and Islamist terrorism has also limited its strategic options in a regional context where Algeria is being wooed by the Western powers to act as security provider (Boserup, Martinez, and Holm 2014, 40). The crisis in Mali, for example, was the focus of the agenda when United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Algiers in October 2012, and during the first visit to the capital in history by a British prime minister, which was made by David Cameron in January 2013. The deteriorating situation in Libya and Algeria's possible support for military intervention in the country were also on the agenda during visits by the French minister of defence and general chief of staff in 2014 (Hernando de Larramendi and Fernández-Molina 2016, 251–252).

▲ In the case of Morocco, the perception of the Sahel is not based on domestic security, but viewed through the lenses of rivalry with Algeria. Rabat sees Algeria's attempts to consolidate its hegemony in the Sahel as a threat to its own attempts to increase its influence in West Africa (International Crisis Group 2015, 40). Since Mohamed VI came to the throne in 1999, relations with sub-Saharan Africa have become a new priority for the country's foreign policy, as this king wishes to enhance Morocco's role on the African continent, extremely weakened in 1984 by Morocco's decision to withdraw from the OAU (Fernández-Molina 2013, 594–616). The country's stated willingness to lead South-South cooperation and act as a 'bridge' between Africa and the EU was made clear in 2000 when the king announced that he was forgiving the foreign debt of less developed African countries at the EU-Africa



summit. Morocco's African policy became more active after 2012, when the country decided to take advantage of the vacuum left by Libya and Algeria's diplomatic inactivity. Algeria, in turn, has not been able to adapt to the transformations in the region against the backdrop of an uncertain domestic context due to the declining health of President Bouteflika, who has not made a single official visit to the Sahel during his term in office (Benchiba 2017).

### **The Sahel: a new space for Algeria-Morocco rivalry**

Between the Tuareg rebellion and the risk of secession in northern Mali, the Sahel has become a new space of competition between Algeria and Morocco. Before the overthrow of Qaddafi in 2011, the Sahel had, above all, been a space of rivalry between Algeria and Libya (Blin 1990, 354–361), with both countries competing to be mediators (Lacher 2011, 3). At times, the countries used their support for armed Tuareg groups in Mali and Niger as part of a proxy rivalry (Arieff 2014, 15), which led Qaddafi to propose the creation of a Tuareg federation in 2005 to integrate all of the tribes of the 'Great Sahara' (Vallée 2012, 153). The rivalry between the two countries also became apparent when Algeria chose not to participate in the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) launched in Tripoli in 1998 (Zoubir 2012b, 92). Colonel Qaddafi's aspirations to establish Libya as a key player on the African continent led him to guide the transformation of the OAU into the African Union with the idea of accelerating unity on the continent (Haddad 2000).

Invoking the geographic argument that Morocco does not have a direct border with the Sahel countries, Algeria tried to exclude Rabat from the various security initiatives implemented in the region after 2001 (Zoubir 2009). This occurred, for example, when Algiers promoted the creation of the African Centre for Studies and Research on Terrorism (CAERT according to its French acronym) in 2004. Rabat was also excluded from the Tamanrasset-based Joint Military Staff Committee (CEMOC according to its French acronym) in 2010. The argument used to leave Rabat out of the Nouakchott Process launched in March 2013, which included the participation of 11 countries from the Maghreb, Sahel and West Africa, was that Morocco did not belong to the African Union (International Crisis Group 2015, 11).

Rabat took advantage of the crisis in Mali, however, to reposition itself as a regional actor in the Sahel. It exploited a window of opportunity created by the combination of, first, the vacuum left by the collapse of Libya, the only Maghrebi country with a defined policy towards the Sahel at that time (Vallée 2012); second, Algeria's self-imposed limits on becoming militarily involved outside its borders; and third, the paralysis in Algerian diplomacy due to the worsening health of President Bouteflika opened a window of



opportunity that Morocco exploited. In 2012, the country endorsed the reac-  
 tivation of CEN-SAD, which it had joined in 2001 in an attempt to make up for  
 its absence from African regional forums since the country decided to with-  
 draw from the OAU in 1984 after the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic  
 (SADR) was admitted into it (Nickels 2013). In 2012, Morocco offered military  
 assistance to the Malian president, Amadou Toumani Touré, after AQIM took  
 control over the northern part of that country. As a non-permanent member  
 of the Security Council, Morocco supported international intervention in Mali  
 in January 2013 (Aït Akdim 2013), and in September of that same year,  
 Mohamed VI attended the inauguration of new president, Ibrahim Boubacar  
 Keita, in Bamako, where he signed several agreements regarding economic  
 cooperation and the training of imams (Tadlaoui 2015). Later in November,  
 Morocco hosted the 2nd Regional Ministerial Conference on Border Security  
 in Rabat (Martinez and Boserup 2017, 157) without the participation of  
 Algeria. The conference activities included the creation of a regional centre  
 for training border security directors, in an attempt to counterbalance Alger-  
 ian initiatives to limit the management of the Sahel crisis to the 'field  
 countries' that directly border the Sahel. In March 2014, Morocco participated  
 in the Flintlock military manoeuvres organised in Niger by the U.S. African  
 Command (AFRICOM) to improve the military capacity of regional forces in  
 the fight against terrorist groups and organised crime in the Sahel region  
 (Jaabouk 2014). Finally, in July 2016, Morocco promised to deliver military  
 and security materials to Niger to assist the country in the fight against  
 Boko Haram (Abba 2016). While always keen to raise awareness of the risks  
 to regional stability inherent in the creation of weak state entities in  
 Western Sahara and the Tuareg territory in northern Mali, Morocco has  
 begun to challenge the role used by Algerian diplomacy to consolidate the  
 country's regional prestige in the eyes of the EU as a facilitator in the resolu-  
 tion of conflicts and a stabilising force on the new security border (European  
 External Action Service 2016).

### **The competition for the role of regional stabilising force and mediator**

The Algerian-Moroccan rivalry in the sub-regional context has materialised in  
 their competition to be seen as stabilising actors through diplomatic  
 mediation initiatives. This is one of the roles that both countries have  
 sought in the past and, in recent years, both have strived to strengthen  
 their image as 'good partners' and security and stability providers. After  
 Algeria gained independence in 1962 with the assistance of national liber-  
 ation movements both within and outside Africa, the country enshrined as  
 normative principles the rejection of the use of force in conflicts, the non-  
 interference in the internal affairs of other countries and the search for

peaceful, negotiated solutions to crises. These pillars, all highly influenced by Algeria's decolonisation experience, became the structural elements for the foreign policy that underpinned Algeria's international prestige. Moreover, the country's defence of these principles was accompanied by its successful activity as a mediator in international disputes and conflicts. In 1975, for instance, Algeria mediated between Iran and Iraq, facilitating the signing of an agreement on the delimitation of the border between the two countries (Allouche 1989, 388–390). The diplomatic work done by Algeria was also decisive in negotiating a successful end to the American hostage crisis in Tehran in 1981 (Korany 1991, 146–148; Slim 1992). Algerian representatives were also involved in the initial mediation process between Iran and Iraq in 1983, although the conflict between the two countries continued until 1987 (Daguzan 2015, 40).

Morocco, in turn, has used mediation and 'good offices' to reinforce its image as a stabilising force in the Mediterranean region in the Arab-Israeli conflict. King Hassan II acted as mediator between the Egyptians and Israelis on the eve of the Camp David Accords signed by the two countries in 1979, hosted the Arab League summit in 1982 in Fez where the first global peace plan for the Middle East was approved, and served as an interlocutor between the Arabs and Israelis, hosting, for example, a visit from Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Ifrane in 1985 (Hernando de Larramendi 1997). On the African continent, Morocco's ability to mediate was impeded during the Cold War by its alignment with Western interests. This became apparent during the Shaba crises in 1977 and 1978, when Hassan II played the role of defender of the values of the 'free world'. The Western Sahara conflict has also had an impact on the country's relations with the continent.<sup>1</sup>

Algeria's ability to mediate in sub-Saharan Africa, on the contrary, has been facilitated by its revolutionary capital (Taleb-Ibrahimi 2013, 387–389). Algiers used its good offices in the Libya-Chad conflict in 1987 (Grimaud 1984, 414) and in the border disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000 (Shandu 2016), among other conflicts. Although Algeria first became involved in the Tuareg question in 1962, it was after the Tuareg revolts in the 1990s that the country intensified its mediation activities between the Tuareg groups and the Sahel states like Mali and Niger.

Beyond the regional implications, the Algerian regime views the Tuareg question as an internal issue, since the creation of a Tuareg state would pose a threat to its national security and territorial integrity (Zoubir 2015, 68). The fear of revolutionary contagion among the Algerian Tuaregs explains the periodic efforts to mediate between the Tuareg populations in northern Mali and Bamako during the 1990s. At that time, Algeria defended the status quo of the borders inherited from the period of colonisation, a principle included in the OAU founding charter. Algeria's good offices were decisive in 2006 in negotiating an agreement by which the Mali government promised to

implement a substantial development programme in the northern part of the country, in exchange for a halt to the rebellion (Mortimer 2015, 14).

When a new rebellion broke out in northern Mali in 2012, it tested Algeria's ability to mediate in a region in transformation. The two movements that had enjoyed Algerian protection in the past, the MLNA and Ansar Dine, joined forces with AQIM and MUJAO to expel the Malian army from the Azawad province. After proclaiming the independence of Azawad, the 'secular' MLNA was then expelled from the territory by AQIM, which founded a short-lived 'Islamic emirate'. Algeria's attempts in 2012 to find a peaceful solution to the conflict were unsuccessful. The country's strategy was to use Ansar Dine and its head, Iyad Ag Ghaly – the former leader of the Tuareg revolts in the 1990s who was well connected to the Algerian authorities – as a proxy in northern Mali through which to negotiate a solution to the conflict. However, this approach failed when the group broke the agreement they had signed with the MNLA in December 2012 under the auspices of Algiers and assumed leadership of the Islamist offensive against some southern Malian cities, accelerating international intervention in the country in January 2013 (Ammour 2013, 4).

The French-led Operation Serval highlighted the failure of the strategy of Algeria, a country highly averse to militarisation of the Sahel by non-African actors. Morocco then took advantage of Algeria's inability to reach a peaceful, negotiated solution and became involved in a crisis that directly affected a key zone for Algerian security. Rabat pushed for collaboration with the Malian government, increased bilateral cooperation and, unsuccessfully, tried to replace Algeria in the northern part of the country (Boitiaux 2014). Morocco accompanied its outreach to the Malian authorities with an approach to some of the rebel actors. In its attempt to play facilitator in solving the crisis, Rabat exploited the MNLA's decision to distance itself from Algeria and join forces with the Tuareg movement. Although Morocco had energetically condemned the unilateral declaration of independence made by this movement in April 2012 (Al-Quds Al-Arabi 9 April 2014), Mohamed VI received MNLA Secretary-General Bilal Ag Acherif with honours in Marrakech in January 2014. He was invited to attend prayers with the king at the Koutoubia Mosque in a symbolic act that the Moroccan authorities used to highlight the historic ties between the regions, as the mosque had been built by the Almoravid sultan, Youssef Ibn Tachfin (Aït Akdim 2014). When the MNLA agreed to replace the demand for independence for Azawad with an appeal for broad autonomy, Rabat was able to move in and reinforce its mediation skills in the context of the stalled Ouagadougou Agreements, backed by Burkina Faso. The reaction from the authorities in Bamako to the rapprochement between Morocco and the MNLA was negative, which paved the way for Algerian diplomat Ramtane Lamamra to re-enter the picture and take charge of the inter-Malian dialogue initiative. The result was the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, signed in 2015 (Chauzal and van Damme

2015, 54). The new closeness between the MNLA and Morocco, however, did put an additional tool in Rabat's hands with regard to Algeria, since Morocco was now in a position to interfere in the Tuareg problem, a question with direct implications for Algerian domestic security (Martinez and Boserup 2017, 157).

The competition between Algeria and Morocco for the role of regional stabilising force and mediator also played out in Libya after the political crisis in the country worsened following the June 2014 legislative elections. The existence of two conflicting Parliaments fighting for institutional legitimacy – one in Tripoli and the other in Tobruk –, the presence of autonomous armed militias and the appearance of the Islamic State group in Sirte in October 2014 together generated a situation of widespread civil unrest that the European states, the United States and the neighbouring countries in North Africa all watched with apprehension. During the spring of 2015, the UN used the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to try to break the deadlock by promoting negotiations between the two Parliaments. Algiers and Rabat competed to host these negotiations, but in the end Rabat won the right to hold them in the Moroccan city of Skhirat (Stitou 2015). This choice was determined in part by the two countries' different attitudes towards the revolts and the international intervention that ended Colonel Qaddafi's regime. While Algeria had criticised the international intervention led by NATO and given shelter to part of the Libyan leader's family, Morocco had supported intervention and recognised the revolutionary authorities of the National Transitional Council (CNT) before Algiers (Zoubir 2012b, 91–93; Boukhars 2013).

Since the beginning of the crisis, Algerian diplomacy has defended the need to find a negotiated solution, organising meetings with Libyan political leaders before each of the negotiating rounds in Skhirat (Jeune Afrique 2015). Unlike the rounds in Morocco, where representatives of the Tripoli and Tobruk Parliaments engaged in indirect discussions through UN Special Representative Bernardino León, the Algeria-backed negotiations were open to a broader spectrum of actors, including representatives from the armed militias (Jeune Afrique 2015). This competition between the two countries was epitomised by the declarations made by their respective ministers of Foreign Affairs, Salaheddine Mezouar and Ramtane Lamamra; each publically expressed their confidence that the successful negotiations were the ones that took place in their country (Stitou 2015).

Difficulties arose in applying the agreement reached at Skhirat in December 2015, which planned for the creation of a Government of National Accord headed by Fayez al-Sarraj and power-sharing between the rival Parliaments. That and a subsequent attack launched from Libyan territory by an armed branch of the Islamic State group against the Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane in March 2016 convinced the Algerian authorities of the need to take a

more active role in stabilising Libya, given the growing risks of spillover into their territory. Since then, Algeria has argued for a consensual modification of the political agreement reached in Skhirat, promoting an inclusive solution in which all the parties would participate and that would respect the territorial integrity of the country (Oukazi 2017). Algiers also believed that the search for this solution must be led by the countries that have direct borders with Libya. Consequently, an initiative proposed by Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi in January 2017 for Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt to work together to find a solution to the Libyan crisis was well received (Bin Abdullah 2017).

### **The competition for expertise in the fight against radical terrorism**

The competition between Algeria and Morocco to present themselves as exporters of security and stability in the region has also influenced the way they understand the fight against terrorism and the processes of religious radicalisation.

The experience that the Algerian authorities acquired during their fight against Islamist groups in the 1990s has allowed the country to claim expertise in the battle against terrorism since the 2001 World Trade Center attacks in New York. Presenting the Algerian civil war not as a consequence of the interruption of the 1992 electoral process, but as an expected large-scale confrontation related to the U.S.-led War on Terror, Algeria managed to gain acceptance as a key actor in security initiatives in the region. The use of this 'terrorism rent' (Keenan 2012) allowed the regime to overcome the moral embargo imposed upon it during the so-called black decade of the 1990s (Thieux 2008) and participate in regional security initiatives promoted by the United States like the Pan-Sahel Initiative, later renamed the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative. Algeria believed that the terrorist groups acting in the Sahel, many of which were made up of Algerians displaced to the south by pressure from the country's own security forces, are criminal organisations financed by illicit activities like drug trafficking and kidnapping and that, therefore, they must be defeated using a police and military focus. This belief, for instance, lies at the base of the Algerian policy against paying ransoms for rescues carried out by Western states (Zoubir 2015, 65).

By contrast, without challenging this focus or rejecting the use of security measures to combat terrorist groups, Morocco sees them and their members through an ideological prism that is the product of a particular deviated interpretation of Islam. When the Tuareg Ansar Dine movement aligned with AQIM in 2012, it gave Rabat the opportunity to frame the conflict in northern Mali in religious terms. To begin with, Morocco has more symbolic resources in this sphere than Algeria and, moreover, the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime left a vacuum in this respect. In his strategy to win influence

in sub-Saharan Africa, Qaddafi had relied on networks created by the Senussi Brotherhood, founded by the grandfather of King Idris I and, above all, on the World Islamic Call Society. Endowed with significant financial resources, this organisation promoted the cultural re-Islamisation of the African states neighbouring Libya by granting scholarships to study at the Al-Da'wa Institute in Tripoli; financing schools and university departments in neighbouring countries. (Vallée 2012, 148–152).

The Moroccan king's status as *Amir al-Mu'minin*, or 'commander of the faithful', gives the monarch a religious legitimacy that has been regularly used as a symbolic resource in foreign relations. Hassan II invoked it, for example, to become president of the Al-Quds Committee at the 1979 Organisation of the Islamic Conference and, later, when he declared his support for ecumenical dialogue when Pope John Paul II visited Morocco in 1985. In addition to this religious legitimacy, since the 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, Mohamed VI has presented himself as a champion of a modern Islam of the 'golden mean' (*al-wasatiyyah*) in contrast to the Wahhabi and Salafist interpretations disseminated by Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf countries (Baylocq and Hlaoua 2016). According to this view, the moderate, balanced version of Moroccan Islam is a combination of an interpretative opening in the Maliki school of law that predominates in the country, the Ash'ari theological doctrine and a deeply-rooted Sufi tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Morocco portrays this Islam of the 'golden mean' as a tool to prevent radicalisation and a barrier against increasing terrorism (Fassi Fihri 2015). The crisis in Mali and the escalation of Jihadist violence in the Sahel have given Morocco the opportunity to export its model of tolerant Islam to sub-Saharan Africa along with the experience acquired in reforming and managing religion (Régragui 2013) as a way to fight the propagation of extremist interpretations. The first cooperation agreement to share Morocco's experience with training imams was signed by Mohamed VI during his visit to Bamako in September 2013 for the inauguration of the new president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (Sakthivel 2014). In a constitutionally secular country (Nievas 2017), the agreement provided for 500 Malian imams 'devoted to the study of the Maliki rite and of the moral doctrine that rejects any form of excommunication' (Mohammed VI 2013) to be trained in Morocco at the Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams and Preachers created in Rabat in 2015 with a capacity for 1000 male and female students from a mixture of Arab, African and European countries (*Le Matin*, March 27, 2015).

Morocco also promoted the creation of the Foundation for African Ulemas at Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez in response to requests received from some African countries (El Katiri 2015, 25). Inaugurated in 2016, the foundation answers to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and has 120 theologians, 17 of whom are women, from 31 countries on the African continent. Their mission is to coordinate African Muslim scholars' efforts to generate and

disseminate ideas of tolerance on the basis of Islamic values in opposition to Jihadist propaganda (Lamlili 2016a). It is also designed to promote 'security and stability with regard to the fundamental needs proclaimed in the Sharia' (Toufiq 2016). This view was reiterated in the address given by Mohamed VI at the inauguration of the foundation's headquarters, when he said that the institution

through its branches in African countries, and together with other religious institutions, will play its role in disseminating enlightened religious precepts and in combating extremism, reclusiveness and terrorism – which our faith does not embrace in any way – but which are advocated by some clerics, in the name of Islam (Mohammed VI 2016).

The Moroccan model of a moderate and just Islam has become an effective soft power tool used to gain influence in its relations with both eastern and western African countries (Jaabouk 2016a). Morocco has donated copies of the Koran, provided assistance for the construction or reconstruction of mosques in Dakar, Dar es Salaam and Conakry (Daoud 2014) and granted scholarships for theological studies at the Mohamed VI Institute, all to reinforce the king's image as a religious leader in Africa. The spiritual ties that have historically united the sub-Saharan African people to the king of Morocco as the *Amir al-Mu'minin* are periodically invoked by Mohamed VI during his visits to the continent, such as his tour in preparation for Morocco's return to the African Union in 2016 and early 2017 (Hernando de Larramendi AQ6 and Tomé 2017).

▲ Morocco's religious diplomacy has also relied on the transnational ties between followers of the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyyah Sufi brotherhoods. The Ministry of Religious Affairs presented these ties in the following terms:

Many Sufi schools witnessed wide dissemination across Africa starting from Morocco. Qadiri and Tijani tariqa-s are the most important and the most widespread; the Qadiri tariqa originated in the Mashriq, but it spread across the regions of Africa through Morocco. Founded in Fez, the Tijani tariqa spread to many a region in Africa to the point that its followers were counted by the millions, all of whose hearts yearned for Fez. They considered their Sheikh Sidi Ahmed al-Tijani's swearing allegiance to Sultan Moulay Ismail a binding allegiance on the part of his followers to the Sharifian dynasty. They would address the successive kings of Morocco as 'Commander of the Faithful'.<sup>3</sup>

This symbolic imagery was initially used by Rabat in its relations with Senegal. In 1985, the League of Ulemas of Morocco and Senegal was created and soon filled with, predominantly, followers of the Tijaniyyah (Sambe 2010). This brotherhood has supported Morocco's position on Western Sahara and acted as a parallel diplomatic channel to deactivate bilateral crises such as the one that took place in 2007 when Rabat recalled its ambassador to Senegal for consultations in response to declarations made by leaders of



the socialist party in that country about Western Sahara (Sambe 2012, 142). The open, tolerant nature of Sufi Islam led the president of Nigeria, Ahmed Bukhari, to request support from the Moroccan leader of the Tijaniyyah to help combat the Boko Haram terrorist group in November 2016 (Jaabouk 2016b).

By contrast, the Algerian regime, which does not have the symbolic resources of the Alawite monarchy at its disposal (Papi 2010), competes with Morocco in this sphere by presenting itself as a model for deradicalisation, based on the experience acquired by President Bouteflika since he became president in 1999. The model that Algeria wants to export is described in the document 'Algeria and Deradicalisation: An Experience to Share' created on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the passage of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Algeria 2015). This programme was presented by the deputy minister for Maghrebi and African affairs, Abdelkader Messahel, during the Global Counterterrorism Forum held in Washington, D.C. in September 2015. For the Algerian authorities, the success of this strategy is reflected in the low number of Algerians recruited by organisations like IS, far below that of Tunisians and Moroccans.<sup>4</sup> Algeria also maintains dialogue initiatives with radical Islamists in a half dozen countries (Howe 2015).

The experience that Algeria is eager to share with other countries is a multi-dimensional model that combines religious, cultural, social, economic and political measures. Like Morocco, the country has a religious tradition based on moderation, openness and tolerance. The Algerian strategy argues that imams and preachers have a role in preventing violent extremism, trying to lead the fight against religious radicalism through a moderate, peaceful and tolerant Islam. In January 2013, coinciding with the launch of Operation Serval in Mali, the country promoted the creation of the League of Ulemas, Preachers and Imams of the Sahel to serve as a benchmark institution in the fight against radicalism and violent extremism in the Sahel region (Ali 2013). The League has representatives from Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. It periodically organises workshops on security in collaboration with regional cooperation structures like the Fusion and Liaison Unit (ULF according to its French acronym). In January 2017, for example, it organised a workshop in the capital of Chad, N'djamena, on the role of religious leaders from the Sahel in protecting young people from extremism. Participants included observers from the Ivory Coast, Senegal and the Republic of Guinea as members of the Nouakchott Process. In March 2017, the group held its first General Assembly in Algiers (Ligue des Ulémas 2017).

The Algerian deradicalisation model attributes an important role to Koranic schools and *zawiyas*, or religious brotherhoods, as 'platforms for the dissemination of positive and constructive ideas and beliefs about Islam [to] form a

bulwark against violent extremism and radicalisation' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Algeria 2015, 15). The transnational nature of the Tijaniyyah has fomented competition between Algeria and Morocco to use its networks in different countries in sub-Saharan Africa. While Morocco supports the Tivaouane branch, which is mostly in Senegal, Algeria supports the Niass branch, which is better established in English-speaking Africa. This rivalry has also moved into the brotherhoods' symbolic spaces of spiritual affiliation. Algiers promotes Tijani pilgrimages to the city of the birth of their founder, Ain Medi, which is on Algerian territory, while Morocco claims that the spiritual centre of the tariqa is Fez, the city where he is buried (Sambe 2010, 143–145).

### Morocco's return to the African union

Morocco has taken advantage of the new regional context to promote its policies towards sub-Saharan Africa in order to reinforce its status as a continental power and recover the space ceded to Algeria since Morocco withdrew from the OAU in 1984. Strengthening relations with the African continent has been a priority since Mohamed VI came to the throne in 1999. Reaching this objective, however, has clashed with a policy that subordinated bilateral cooperation to the position adopted by each African state regarding Western Sahara. Because of the backing that the SADR has enjoyed in a large number of countries in eastern and southern Africa, Morocco's ability to implement a continental-wide policy for sub-Saharan countries as a group has been limited.

The Moroccan decision-making elite began to reconsider this position and the country's unsuccessful 'empty-chair' policy maintained since it withdrew from the OAU, as revealed by various reports drafted by think tanks with links to the royal palace like the Institute Amadeus (2014) and the Institut Royale des Études Stratégiques (2015). Morocco's absence from decision-making bodies, first in the OAU and then in the AU, weakened the country's position in Africa, allowing Algeria and other countries with ties to the SADR like South Africa to steer the OAU's position regarding Western Sahara. Morocco was particularly concerned about the appointment of an AU special envoy for Western Sahara for the first time in the organisation's history when, in 2014, former Mozambique president Joaquim Chissano was named to the post. Known for his pro-Sahrawi positions, it was he who asked the UN Security Council to set a date for a referendum and for the MINURSO mandate to be extended to the protection of human rights, while also denouncing Morocco's illegal exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources (Armstrong 2017). This pushed Moroccan diplomacy out of its comfort zone in French-speaking West Africa, forcing the country to seek relationships with other countries on the continent, regardless of their position on Western Sahara.

This realist shift was also seen in Mohamed VI's decision to return to the AU in July 2016, expressed in a letter sent to the organisation's 27th summit being held in Ruanda. This request was accompanied by a diplomatic offensive towards sub-Saharan Africa personally led by Mohamed VI who visited 15 African capitals in late 2016 and early 2017 in countries including Ruanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Ghana, Niger and South Sudan. The country's objective was reached four months later when the pan-African organisation approved the admission of Morocco during the 28th AU summit in Addis Ababa in January 2017, with the support of 39 of its 54 members, but not Algeria (Hernando de Larramendi and Tomé 2017). It is against this backdrop that Morocco decided in 2017 to improve relations with the countries in eastern and southern Africa that recognise the SADR, requesting membership in ECOWAS, an organisation that includes Mali and Niger, countries that Algeria considers part of its strategic depth. In a speech to the AU, the Moroccan king connected this strategic commitment to the African continent to the failure of the Arab Maghreb Union, 'the least integrated region in the Africa continent, if not in the whole world' (Mohammed VI 2017).

Morocco has relied on two primary tools in its policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. Along with religious diplomacy, the country has promoted economic cooperation to strengthen its ties with countries hitherto closer to Algeria. Using a South-South cooperation logic, Rabat has signed cooperation agreements, has committed to making investments and has challenged Algeria's role in the region through large-scale projects in Ethiopia and Niger, countries that continue to recognise the SADR (Cólogan 2017). The project to construct a pipeline connecting Nigerian fields with Morocco crossing 12 West African countries is particularly emblematic. This project replaced an earlier unimplemented plan to construct a pipeline to connect Nigerian gas fields to Algeria through Niger (Tilouine and Bozonnet 2017).

In its policy to reach out to sub-Saharan Africa, Rabat has combined the use of public resources – establishing the ad-hoc sovereign wealth fund, Ithmar, to finance projects (Gharbaoui 2016) – with the participation of private companies to launch development projects. Morocco's economic penetration in the continent is viewed with suspicion by the Algerian authorities. With its diplomacy revived, Algiers has tried to counter its loss of image and influence by forgiving the debt of 14 African countries (Arbani 2013) and has encouraged investment in the continent by private Algerian operators, although such efforts have been complicated by restrictive laws (Benchiba 2017). The organisation of the first African Investment and Business Forum in Algiers in December 2016 is another example of this approach.

The Morocco-Algeria rivalry also plays out in the arena of image. When Algeria was accused of implementing a policy of 'discrimination and violence' towards sub-Saharan immigrants, Rabat countered by regularising the Africans who had settled in Morocco. Although the first regularisation in 2014

was limited and questioned by both civil society and human rights defence organisations, the Moroccan authorities launched a new operation to regularise immigrants in December 2016 that was presented as the antithesis to Algerian policy at a moment when the country was expelling a thousand illegal African immigrants (Lamlili 2016b).

## Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of political changes stemming from the 2011 Arab Uprisings at the sub-regional level, showing how the pattern of rivalry that characterises Algerian-Moroccan relations has prevailed while adapting to a tumultuous regional situation. The perception of shared threat in the face of the pro-democratic revolts that brought down Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi initially fostered a 'defensive détente' between the Moroccan and Algerian regimes. When the perception of threat receded, the bilateral rivalry returned with even more strength, blocking any advance in the Maghrebi regional integration project. The article has also shown how this rivalry has extended into the Sahel and other sub-Saharan regions, where Morocco had been maintaining a low profile since withdrawing from the OAU in 1984.

## Notes

1. This did not stop Rabat from acting as mediator between Mauritania and Senegal in 1989 and in the Mano River conflict between Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia in 2002 (Barre 1995, 43).
2. These three elements are highlighted as conforming Moroccan religious identity on the Ministry of Religious Affairs website. See <http://habous.gov.ma/fr/islam-au-maroc.html>
3. See "Press Release on the Occasion of The Announcement of the Creation of the Foundation for African Muslims Scholars", 13 July 2015. <http://habous.gov.ma/fr/fondation-mohammed-vi-des-oul%C3%A9ma-africains/580-articles-ar/2861-press-release-on-the-occasion-of-the-announcement-of-the-creation-of-the-foundation.html>
4. According to data from December 2015, the number of Algerian combatants in IS was 200, while there were an estimated 1200–1500 Moroccans and 6000–7000 Tunisians (Gustafsson 2016).

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